

Orwell's 1984 as Civilisational Diagnosis

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 24th January 2026 Accepted: 01st February 2026 Published: 05th February 2026 Keywords: <i>Civilisation, Power, Ethical advancement, Dystopia, Civilised Barbarism</i>	George Orwell's 1984 is commonly interpreted as a political warning against totalitarianism. This paper situates the novel within humanities-based debates on civilisation by reading dystopia as a form of civilisational self-critique rather than as the negation of civilisation. It argues that 1984 interrogates the assumption that historical progress and rational organisation necessarily lead to ethical advancement. Through a close, chronological reading of the novel, the paper examines how institutions associated with civilisation such as language, bureaucracy, technology, and historical record-keeping, are transformed into mechanisms that erode truth, memory, and moral agency. Drawing on dystopian theory and political philosophy, the analysis shows how Orwell depicts a condition of 'civilised barbarism,' in which order and efficiency persist while ethical life collapses. The paper further places Orwell's diagnosis in dialogue with Indian civilisational thought, particularly its emphasis on dharma and ethical restraint, to highlight alternative understandings of power, progress, and civilisation.
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Introduction

George Orwell's 1984 (1949) has conventionally been read as a cautionary tale against totalitarianism, ideological absolutism, and the abuses of state power. Such readings risk limiting the novel to the political anxieties of mid-twentieth century Europe. Instead, this article argues that 1984 stages a deeper civilisational crisis. It interrogates the assumption that historical progress, technological rationality, and administrative efficiency necessarily culminate in ethical advancement. Orwell's dystopia does not merely depict political tyranny; it reveals a form of what may be termed 'civilised barbarism,' wherein the instruments of civilisation such as language, bureaucracy, technology, and rational planning, are redeployed to systematically erode truth, memory, and moral agency.

Read in the context of contemporary debates on utopia, dystopia, and civilisational progress, 1984 enables a critical re-examination of the assumption that civilisation represents the ethical culmination of human history. Engaging the dystopian imagination as a humanities-based mode of civilisational inquiry, this article contributes to interdisciplinary debates on how modern societies conceptualise progress, power, and ethical limits.

By situating 1984 within dystopian theory and civilisational critique, this article advances three claims. First, Orwell's dystopia is not an aberration from civilisation but an immanent possibility within modern civilisational logic itself. Second, the novel's narrative progression constitutes a systematic dismantling of the ethical subject from surveillance to epistemic collapse and finally to psychological domination. Third, when read alongside Indian civilisational thought, particularly its emphasis on *dharma*, moral restraint, and self-limiting power, 1984 exposes the dangers of progress freed from ethical accountability. In doing so, the article reframes Orwell's novel as a work of civilisational diagnosis rather than political fable alone.

Methodologically, this article adopts a civilisational-analytic reading of 1984, combining close textual analysis with dystopian theory and comparative ethical reflection. Rather than treating the novel solely as a political satire, it examines the novel as a diagnostic text that reveals the ethical limits of modern civilisational rationality.

Dystopia as Civilisational Critique

Dystopia, as a literary and theoretical mode, emerges from the erosion of utopian confidence in the modern era. While classical utopias presupposed the rational perfectibility of society, dystopian narratives respond to the historical experience of mass bureaucracy, ideological governance, and technological domination. Krishan Kumar identifies dystopia as a reaction to the 'dark side of planned rationality,' where systems designed to optimise order generate new forms of coercion (Kumar 1987). Tom Moylan further argues that dystopia operates as a form of 'critical negation,' where promises of security and efficiency often mask structures of domination (Moylan 2000).

Within this tradition, 1984 exemplifies what M. Keith Booker describes as dystopia's tendency to deduce existing social tendencies rather than imagine speculative futures (Booker 1994). Orwell's Oceania is not technologically extravagant; rather, it is bureaucratically meticulous. Its horror lies in its banality. The novel thus participates in a broader civilisational critique, revealing how modernity's tools such as statistics, surveillance, linguistic standardisation, can function as mechanisms of ethical erasure. Dystopia, in this sense, is not anti-civilisational but diagnostic: it exposes civilisation's internal contradictions.

Orwell wrote 1984 in the aftermath of the Second World War, at a historical moment marked by the expansion of bureaucratic governance, mass surveillance, and rational planning across ideological systems. While the novel is often situated within the specific context of Cold War politics and USSR regime, its anxieties extend beyond any single regime. The civilisational significance of 1984 lies in its response to a broader modern condition in which administrative rationality, technological mediation, and ideological certainty converge. Orwell's dystopia thus reflects not a historical exception but a structural tendency within modern civilisation itself, where the pursuit of order increasingly overrides ethical restraint.

Narrative Structure and Plot Orientation

The novel 1984 is structured in three distinct parts, tracing the progressive erosion of individual autonomy under totalitarian rule. The novel is set in Oceania, a state governed by the omnipresent Party and its

symbolic leader, Big Brother. Winston Smith, a minor official in the Ministry of Truth, works to falsify historical records in accordance with the Party's shifting narratives. Despite living under constant surveillance, Winston develops private doubts about the regime. He begins a secret romantic relationship with Julia, an act that temporarily affirms personal desire and resistance.

In the second part of the novel, Winston's fragile rebellion deepens as he imagines the possibility of organised opposition and seeks meaning in forbidden memories, language, and emotional attachment. This illusion of resistance collapses when Winston and Julia are arrested by the Thought Police. The final part depicts Winston's imprisonment in the Ministry of Love, where he is subjected to systematic torture and psychological reconditioning by O'Brien, a Party intellectual. The novel concludes with Winston's complete ideological submission, marking the annihilation of ethical selfhood rather than physical death.

Surveillance and the Reconfiguration of the Human Subject

The opening chapters of 1984 establish a social order structured by omnipresent surveillance. The telescreen, which 'received and transmitted simultaneously,' collapses the distinction between public and private life (Orwell 1949, 4). Surveillance in Oceania is not merely a technique of control but a reconfiguration of subjectivity itself. Citizens are compelled to internalise the gaze of the Party, transforming external coercion into self-regulation.

This condition resonates with Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, wherein visibility becomes a trap and power operates through internalised norms rather than overt violence (Foucault 1977). Yet Orwell extends this logic further. Surveillance in 1984 is not corrective but annihilative. It does not aim to reform behaviour but to eliminate the possibility of dissenting thought. The result is a civilisation that achieves order not through ethical consensus but through psychological saturation.

Language, Newspeak, and Epistemic Collapse

One of Orwell's most enduring contributions lies in his depiction of linguistic control through Newspeak. The Party's aim, as Syme explains, is 'to narrow the range of thought' by systematically eliminating words that enable dissent (Orwell 1949, 54). Language here is not merely a medium of communication but the infrastructure of thought itself.

From a civilisational perspective, this represents an epistemic collapse. Language, traditionally a repository of collective memory and ethical reflection, is reduced to an instrument of administrative efficiency. Raymond Williams observes that Orwell understood language as a form of social control embedded in material practices (Williams 1971). In 1984, the destruction of language parallels the destruction of history, as records are endlessly rewritten to conform to the Party's present needs. The famous slogan "Who controls the past controls the future; Who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 1949, 37) captures a civilisation severed from temporal continuity.

History, Memory, and the Manufacture of Reality

Winston Smith's role in the Ministry of Truth reveals the mechanics of historical falsification. His task is not to fabricate plausible lies but to ensure that contradiction itself disappears. Once documents are altered and originals destroyed, the Party's version of reality becomes incontrovertible. As Winston reflects, "The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth" (Orwell 1949, 75).

Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism is relatable here. She argues that total domination seeks not merely obedience but the destruction of the capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood (Arendt 1951). Orwell dramatises this condition at the level of everyday bureaucratic labour. Civilisation, in the novel, survives institutionally while collapsing ethically. Its archives, ministries, and rituals persist, but their moral content has been hollowed out.

Power, Torture, and the End of the Ethical Self

The final section of 1984 marks a decisive shift from ideological control to psychological annihilation. O'Brien's interrogation of Winston exposes the Party's conception of power in its purest form. Power, O'Brien asserts, is not a means to an end but an end in itself. In his words, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever" (Orwell 1949, 267).

This vision represents the terminal point of civilised barbarism. Torture is not employed to extract information or enforce conformity but to destroy the possibility of inner resistance. Winston's eventual betrayal of Julia signifies the collapse of ethical relationality. The foundational elements of civilisation such as love, memory, and loyalty are rendered impossible. What remains is survival without dignity.

From this perspective, Oceania represents not the excess of power alone but the absence of self-limiting ethics. Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation as materially advanced yet morally impoverished is particularly resonant here. In *Hind Swaraj*, he warns that civilisation measured solely by efficiency risks becoming dehumanising (Gandhi 1909). Orwell's dystopia can thus be read as a fictional realisation of a critique that a society technologically organised but ethically void.

'1984' in Critical Discourse

Scholarly interpretations of 1984 have variously emphasised its political, psychological, and linguistic dimensions. Bernard Crick situates the novel within Orwell's lifelong critique of authoritarian socialism and imperialism (Crick 1980). Others, such as Christopher Hitchens, read the novel as a moral warning against ideological certainty in all its forms (Hitchens 2002). More recent scholarship has drawn attention to the novel's relevance in the age of digital surveillance and algorithmic governance.

What these readings often understate, however, is the novel's civilisational scope. 1984 is not solely about the state; it is about the fate of ethical life under conditions of hyper-rationalised control. Its enduring relevance lies in its refusal to locate dystopia outside civilisation. Instead, Orwell suggests that civilisation itself, when stripped of moral restraint, can become the vehicle of barbarism.

Conclusion

1984 endures not because it predicts a specific political future, but because it exposes a structural vulnerability within modern civilisation itself. Orwell's dystopia reveals how rational planning, linguistic control, and technological surveillance, often celebrated as markers of progress, can culminate in the systematic destruction of ethical life. By reading the novel through dystopian theory and civilisational critique, this article has argued that the novel diagnoses a condition of civilised barbarism, where institutions survive but moral agency collapses.

This article contributes to Orwell scholarship and civilisational studies by reframing 1984 not merely as a critique of authoritarian politics but as a sustained analysis of how modern civilisation itself can generate ethical collapse through rationalised power. In an era marked by data surveillance, historical revisionism, and ideological polarisation, Orwell's warning remains urgent. The endpoint of civilisation, 1984 suggests, is not predetermined. It depends on whether power remains accountable to ethics or whether civilisation, in perfecting its tools, forgets its purpose.

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